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PROTESTANTISM AND THE PROBLEM OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN MODERN SOCIETY

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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The clash between divergent economic, political and religious isms in contemporary western culture is symptomatic of a far deeper and more fundamental conflict in social ideologies. Inherent in the clash between competitive and totalitarian economic theories, in the hostility between democratic and absolutist political philosophies and in the incompatibility of Protestant Christianity and collectivistic religions is a crucial ideological tension between egocentrism and sociocentrism. The recurrence of this tension has precipitated most of the periods of social unrest and confusion which have appeared in the social evolution of western culture. It has been the absence of this tension, furthermore, which has permitted the rise of orderly periods of social integration and achievement.

After five centuries of egocentrism in the social evolution of the West during which time individuality was firmly established as the dominant economic, political and religious datum, there appears to be a resurgence of sociocentrism in the present time which threatens to terminate the age of individualism and introduce an age of collectivism and totalitarianism. Western culture appears to be facing the end of an era. Individualism may no longer be considered the undisputed social ideology of modern times. A growing discontent with egocentric hypotheses and a maturing cognizance of the interdependence and mutuality of human life are breeding powerful collectivistic theories and practices. The rapid growth and the aggressive organization of totalitarian economic, political and religious systems in recent years not only has put individualism on the defensive but has challenged the basic tenets of its ideology as well.

The widespread social uncertainty and insecurity and the force of anti-individualistic philosophies and programs betoken the proportions which the tension between individualistic and collectivistic emphases has assumed. With the movement in western

culture unmistakably away from individualism in the direction of collectivism, the question arises as to the future of economic, political and religious systems founded upon egocentric hypotheses. This appears to be more than a mere question of survival possibilities. It is a question related intimately to the validity of individualistic hypotheses and to the significance of values and ideals defined by them.

Two ideologies most acutely affected by the growth of anti-individualistic collectivism in the modern world are those of democracy and Protestant Christianity. Both of these ideologies are sustained by an explicit or an implicit individualism. Within its socio-political reference, democracy is based upon principles which are uncompromisingly individualistic. It is a system looking to the individual for creativity and growth, and defining itself as an active means for the achievement of these possibilities. By making voluntary association and responsible sociality the framework of its ideology, democracy has dedicated itself to the end of greater expression and realization for individuality. Protestant Christianity parallels in its spiritual emphasis the individualism of democracy. Within its theory and practice, Protestantism marks the coalescence of the social attitudes of democracy and the spiritual doctrines of Christianity. Born of the Renaissance and the Reformation, it matured within the same social tradition as democracy, and reflects the same basic egocentrism in its social reference. Despite certain social and ecclesiastical modifications, it has maintained itself in western culture during the four centuries of its emergence as the Christian ideology of individualism. Its basic doctrines have been egocentric, and the regeneration of individual souls has been its accepted task.

The totalitarian systems of Communism, Fascism and National Socialism express the challenge which democracy and Protestantism must face in the modern world. Where democracies seek the full corporate welfare as a means to the enrichment of individuals in society, totalitarianisms and collectivisms define their goal in terms of corporate social welfare as an end in itself. Where Protestantism recognizes the individual soul as the focus of regeneration within the human sphere, totalitarian religions, sustained by current collectivisms, insist that only the social whole - delimited and made exclusive by nationalism - may be considered the

acceptable focus of regeneration.

The problem of democracy and Protestantism is a crucial one. To permit themselves to be drawn into totalitarianism would mean the denial of the principles of social and spiritual individualism which undergird them. However, to defend themselves against the attacks of totalitarianism, they must be able to sustain their claim that the individual is the primary social datum in terms of which social and religious ideologies must be stated. Obviously, neither the problem of social individualism versus social totalitarianism nor the problem of spiritual individualism versus spiritual totalitarianism can be solved by force or by mere explication of unexamined hypotheses. Nor can they be solved by further rationalizations from the initial speculations. There must be achieved an interpretation of the nature and function of the individual in society which is capable of validation by objective and impartial sociological and psychological evidence.

The conflict between egocentrism and sociocentrism can be solved only by the application of scientifically defensible data. Democracy and Protestantism cannot hope to defend their positions, socially or spiritually, if the body of objective social evidence refutes individualism. Likewise, it must be recognized that totalitarianism cannot maintain its anti-individualism in these times without providing an adequate defense of the social hypotheses underlying it. Since the crux of the problem, therefore, is the definition of individuality, it becomes imperative for democracy and Protestantism, as well as for totalitarianism, to examine objectively the nature and function of individuality in society.

A survey of the history of social thought in the West discloses that there has been a gradual accumulation of sociological and psychological data which has continually made the concept of individuality more intelligible and comprehensive. With the refinement of scientific method and with the application of this method to the social environment and to human behavior, the procedure of social theorizing has been gradually transformed from one of adapting interpretations of individuality to suit economic, political and religious expedients, to one of defining these systems in terms of an understanding of the nature and function of individuality in society. Early social theories reflected fragmentary observations and abundant speculation; later theories rested upon more extensive

studies of individuality and more careful deductions from sociological and psychological evidence. The development of social thought in western culture has been an evolution of social theories in the direction of greater adequacy and exactness. The most rapid growth in social understanding has taken place during the last century with the emergence of specialized biological and sociological sciences, and with the development of social psychology.

Sociological and psychological researches into the nature and function of individuality in society have provided an extensive accumulation of social data from which a comprehensive and socially adequate interpretation of individuality may be derived. Such an interpretation will have significant implication for the contemporary conflict between egocentrism and sociocentrism because it will provide a valid basis for the possible resolution of this tension. However, until both individualistic and totalitarian social and religious ideologies can be examined and evaluated in light of a socially defensible definition of individuality, there can be little hope for the ultimate resolution of the economic, political and religious conflicts engendered by them.

Two complementary approaches to the understanding of individuality are available, both of which furnish significant data for valid social interpretation. The first of these, the historical approach, discloses the processes of social evolution through which human organisms in physical proximity finally became individual personalities in society. This approach introduces individuality within the context of its social emergence. It defines individuality in terms of the bio-social forces which converge in the ultimate achievement of human personality. The second of these approaches, the socio-psychological approach, is focused upon the individual within a specific time-space situation. It reveals the manner in which the individual realizes meaningful selfhood and the processes through which he relates himself determinatively to the social milieu.

The evidence, which the historical and the socio-psychological approaches to individuality disclose, indicates that the individual in society is a unique physiological organism, differentiated in time and space by a unitive orientation and coordination of muscular, glandular and neural functions and possibilities. He emerges historically as "an acting being whose perceptions are

defined and whose role is determined by what is said and done to him and by the responses that are made to what he says and does."[1]

Essentially a product of the social community, individuality achieves through intellect and imagination an autonomous selfhood capable of introducing into the immediate social process a new synthesis of meaning and novel contingencies which may advance both his own evolution and that of society. Since the self-conscious and unitive individuality represents a new assimilation, without duplicate, of experience and knowledge, it functions in the social situation in terms of commonly recognized meanings and processes, yet differentiated from them by virtue of its own distinctiveness in time and space.

Individuality cannot be defined apart from the social community whose meanings and interrelations it shares, and in terms of which its behavior patterns are formed. Because of its deep rootage in the physiological, psychological and sociological soil of its community, individuality would be devoid of reality if considered in isolation from its social situation. Conversely, individuality is more than mere sociality. Although a product of social forces resident in heredity and environment, individuality is distinctly more than a passively interacting refinement of the social organism. Were individuality merely a determined function of the social organism, it could only relate itself to society as a cell to its organism. However, individuality functions in differentiation from as well as in harmony with society, and so it cannot be neutralized into social passivity. Within the determined range of its possibilities, individuality functions as an independent and autonomous entity. The individual is ever more than the mere sum of social forces which inhere in his being by virtue of his self-conscious and purposive nature. While society may be understood to be the most inclusive social reality, it can be defined only in terms of less inclusive social realities - individuals.

Thus, the interpretation of individuality which seems to be most adequately sustained by the evidence is that of a socially determined and a socially determining individuality. Within the social milieu, individuality manifests itself as a dynamic and

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[1] Ellsworth Faris, The Nature of Human Nature (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1937), p. 35.

creative nucleus of societal energy. Although individuality remains inseparably bound up with social processes and common meanings, it functions as a unique orientation of intelligent and imaginative experience.

It seems evident, therefore, that the statement of social theories must be in terms of social individuality if they are to recognize adequately the sociality of the individual, and the individualization of social reality. Being the totality of meanings attained and integrated through a long process of evolutionary interaction and intercommunication, society possesses objective reality only in the degree in which it is concretized in coordinate individualities. Although society, because of its continuity, is ever more than any single individual, or combination of individuals, society per se would be a meaningless abstraction apart from its manifestation in living particularized individuals. Being both a concretion, in part, of the social processes and a uniquely creative orientation of social possibilities, individuality in society appears to be the unit of immediate social reality. In brief, social individuality may be considered the common denominator for any collective systematization of social meanings and processes.

From an objective sociological and psychological analysis of individuality in society, it is evident that neither the more extreme statements of individualistic democratic and Protestant ideologies nor those of collectivistic totalitarianism represent more than half-truths. Individuality is an autonomous social reality and society does give to individuality its meaning and reference. Therefore, while democratic and Protestant theories recognize the determinative role of individuality in society, they ignore the fact that individuality is a product of determinative social and biological processes. Likewise, while totalitarian theory exploits the inclusive and determinative character of society, it neglects the fact that particularized individuals possess a capacity for social determination by virtue of the unique orientation of intelligence, social experience and imagination which they represent. Negatively stated, society cannot be described as a social machine constructed by human beings for their convenience nor can it be analogized into a vast organism creating new individuals as cells to replace outworn or outgrown ones. Something more than a mere relationship of self-conscious individuals, society is, how-

ever, inevitably translated in terms of them. It lives only as they live, and it evolves only as they make such evolution possible.

While there are innumerable economic and political factors involved in the conflict between democracy and totalitarianism, and between Protestant Christianity and the religions of collectivism, the fundamental ideological differences could be radically modified by the introduction of the concept of social individuality. An ideological redefinition of democratic and totalitarian theories would reduce the tension occasioned by their contradictory interpretations of the nature of individuality and society. The reinterpretation of democratic social theory in light of socially responsive and socially responsible individuality would result in a more socially adequate egocentrism. In totalitarianism, the introduction of the concept of social individuality would mean the restoration of individuality to a positive position within an active social consciousness.

It appears probable, also, that the inherent tension between Protestantism and religious collectivism would be resolved by the reorientation of these spiritual ideologies to a concept of socially determined and socially determining individuality. Since the human focus of religion falls within the range of social correction, a socialization of the egocentrism of Protestantism and an individualization of the totalitarianism of collectivistic religions would resolve one of the major causes of tension existing between these two religious ideologies.

The promise of Protestantism rests in its capacity for socializing the human focus of its theology and practice. The historic motivation of Protestantism has been the regeneration of individuals through direct personal union with God. An atomic and self-sufficient conception of the individual permitted the interpretation of this regeneration in terms practically unrelated to the societal nature of individuality. However, with the growth of social understanding in recent decades, there has developed within an increasing area of Protestant thought a recognition of the fact that the regeneration of individuals involves a regeneration of the relationships and processes which root the individual in society. This discovery of the societal nature of the individual has brought with it the conviction that "the gospel is the power of God unto salvation not to the individual or society, but to the individual in society."

This recognition[1] of the social nature of the spiritual individual carries with it the belief that "no gospel is entitled to call itself Christian which does not propose to weave the Christian faith into the whole social and spiritual fabric of humanity"[2] since "the inner life of the individual and the outer life of society belong together."[3] Protestantism is being faced with the social fact that there can be no salvation of the individual or of the social order except as they are saved together.

The growth of social understanding within Protestantism establishes for it two alternatives in the modern world. It may refuse to assimilate the growing social consciousness and disclaim any responsibility for the social relationships and processes in which the individual is involved. Such a course in an age acutely conscious of its mutuality and interdependence would probably seal the fate of Protestant Christianity. On the other hand, Protestantism may permit its theology and program to be transformed by the increasing knowledge of individuality and society. Such transformation would restore to Protestantism its lost sense of social responsibility through the enlargement of its traditional sense of responsibility for the individual. A socialization of the individualistic emphasis of Protestantism would in no way betray the historic gospel or modify the original personal dynamic of the Christian program. The growth of social understanding and the assimilation of it by Protestantism would affect only the human referent of the Christian gospel and would neither minimize nor distort the experience of God in individual life.

The promise of Protestantism in these days rests upon the growing socialization of its ideology and program. Within its preaching, there has developed a pregnant social consciousness which is restoring a positive social outreach to the ministry and activity of the church. Furthermore, Protestantism sustains countless social action movements which have grown out of the sense of

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[1]Shailer Mathews, The Individual and the Social Gospel (New York: Layman's Missionary Movement Press, 1914), p. 83.

[2]Charles C. Morrison, "Christianity's Responsibility for the Character of Civilization," Christendom, I, No. 3 (Spring 1936), 509.

[3]Ibid., p. 503.

social responsibility generating within it. The emergence of the ecumenical spirit, and the desire to federate all religious interests for greater effectiveness in the modern world, which appear in contemporary Protestant Christianity, further demonstrate the new power resident in a religion of regeneration which defines its focus in terms of social individuals within an ongoing social process.

The social reorientation of Protestantism in this age means the restoration to Protestant Christianity of that sense of social inclusiveness which was lost when individualism in religion divided Christendom in the days of the Reformation. The socialization of Protestantism does not mean a forfeiture of its distinctive recognition of spiritual individuality. It merely means a modification of this individualism in terms of the sociality of individuality. Growing social understanding deepens the meaning of Protestantism in society and broadens the scope of its spiritual effectiveness. In the social reorientation of Protestantism to a socially responsive and a socially responsible individuality is the promise of a renaissance of effective Christianity in modern society.